

The Hegemonic Female Fantasy
in AN UNMARRIED WOMAN and CRAIG'S WIFE

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Hegemony is a term in Marxist theory used by Antonio Gramsci to describe the complex ways that the dominant, most powerful class (in our era, the bourgeoisie) maintains control over ideas.¹ The term originally derives from the Greek and was used to describe Athens' prestige and influence over the other Greek city states. The concept of hegemony is most useful if seen as operating on two interrelated and mutually reinforcing levels: the institutional and the psychological. The dominant class has the power to write history and impose norms because it controls and directs economic, state, cultural, scientific, religious, educational, etc., institutions. In this sense, the health care system or the educational system not only deliver material services but are also ideological systems. In the cultural sphere, some institutions are tied directly to the state (e.g., public education) and some indirectly through grants (e.g., private universities). Even the independent arts depend on institutions for funding and exhibition and shape their products accordingly. Furthermore, certain major institutions comprise generally agreed upon systems for conducting personal affairs, and these shape women's lives directly, namely the institutions of marriage, the family, and heterosexuality.² Such institutions are not located in a place but have great normative force and are both enacted and protected by law.

If in the U.S. all these institutions foster an ideology that promotes the outlook of white middle class males, no one is surprised. Most of the narrative arts of our era--novels, plays, films, television programs--are devoted to working out the conflicts and contradictions of the bourgeoisie in terms understandable and acceptable to its male members. For example, both *KRAMER VS. KRAMER* and *ORDINARY PEOPLE* demonstrate that men need to be more emotional and loving and caring. Since women's liberation has supposedly robbed women of such qualities, these two male melodramas imply that if men get rid of the woman in the house, they can grow into what they need and want to be. The two films abolish the married couple in favor of the boys.

Women in the U.S. also live under bourgeois patriarchal hegemony and they do so complexly. The concept of hegemony lets us consider how we as women are exposed to, use, sometimes enjoy and sometimes reject the cultural products and the dominant

ideas around us. We grow up in a world of received notions and attitudes, around which we shape our emotional life.³ We can analyze hegemony in terms of institutional compulsion or the way that institutions structure choices, we can also analyze how our desires and emotions often lead us to choose or settle for commonly held ideas about what our life as women should be.⁴ The narrative arts, especially those set in the domestic sphere, e.g., novels, melodramas, and sex comedies, present scenarios that depict, often conservatively, what our choices, contradictions, and conflicts are.⁵ For example, sex comedies, particularly the kind seen at suburban dinner theaters, either involve traditional Oedipal seduction or swapping marital partners but keeping the couple intact; sexual love always finally inheres in the couple. Paul Mazursky's *BLUME IN LOVE* and *BOB AND CAROL AND TED AND ALICE* represent films of this type, presumably "in tune" with modern mores but with very old comic scenarios. Only with difficulty can we imagine rewriting those scenarios on entirely different terms.

I use the term "hegemonic female fantasy" to describe a phenomenon I have observed in novels, melodramas, television situation comedies, soap operas, and advertisements--that is, in the narrative arts that deal directly with the sphere institutionally and emotionally relegated to women: the domestic sphere. Out of each narrative a notion about women emerges. The characters' desires and needs make up much of the content of their speeches and are the "stuff" that impel the action. But each narrative also has ways to contain and limit its consideration of women's desires and needs: through what is not allowed, through negative example characters, through the connotative manipulation of the *mise-en-scene*, or through a narrative progression that shows certain kinds of conflicts and resolutions as more important than others. The hegemonic female fantasy is an historical creation--a visible projection in our fictions at any given date of how women are socially, by consensus, defined.⁶

That we like the fictions--at least in part, at least some of them--is inevitable. Fiction also offered our parents narrative scenarios which structured *their* notions of what family life would and should be like. We rebel against some facets of the scenario (to stop going to church was youth's big rebellion in my twenties) but not against all. Furthermore, the hegemonic fantasy put forth by artistic fiction itself changes with history both to express and to contain ongoing changes already being felt in women's lives.

I use the term hegemonic female fantasy in the sense of a daydream that we women could muster up for ourselves, but one that would be pretty socially acceptable. It is the safe fantasy--one we all hold in certain aspects, and certainly the one propagated culturally. For me personally, Diahann Carroll in Richard Rogers' play *No Strings* expressed the hegemonic female fantasy most cogently when she sang, "All I want is lots of money, a nice position, and loads of lovely love." In the 80s the hegemonic

fantasy indicates that women should "fulfill their potential," but also that they should find and value a deep emotional experience with an appropriate man. Lesbian love, promiscuity in a senior citizens' home, total dedication to discovering a new virus, serving as an officer in a revolutionary army, or having a bevy of lovers twenty years younger than oneself--these are clearly roles for women that the hegemonic female fantasy has not embraced. The hegemonic fantasy flattens out both the contradictions in women's lives and women's options. It sets out a few issues which are treated as the key issues, and it deals with those issues in a socially acceptable and often predictable way. The artistic tactics for making the conflicts and their resolutions acceptable, for making the fantasy hegemonic or mainstream, are worth attending to in close detail, for they have much to teach us about the interconnections between the narrative arts, ideology, and what we want.

AN UNMARRIED WOMAN's Tactics

Paul Mazursky's AN UNMARRIED WOMAN is one of a series of contemporary film offerings depicting the mature woman "alone" and exploring her problems and choices. This particular film is fascinating for the rapidity with which it establishes common dilemmas faced by many single women and then offers a fantasy-fulfillment or resolution to each dilemma, one right after the other. Furthermore, the mise-en-scene is alternatively gratifying and punitive; it emotionally delimits the parameters within which we will be allowed to consider the woman's situation. By taking a close look at this film, I wish to analyze the kinds of fulfillments it projects, why for most women its fulfillments usually remain in the realm of daydream or fantasy, and how it contains and even punishes certain aspects of the very fantasies it elicits.

There are four ways by which AN UNMARRIED WOMEN manipulates and resolves conflicts. First, a conflict and its resolution may be just mentioned, but then the subject dropped. This narrative strategy has the effect of letting the audience remain comfortably liberal, with a reaction such as, "Well, now that we've dealt with that (let it into our consciousness in a way we can bear to think about it), let's go on to something else." Second, the film often briefly introduces a fantasy resolution to some problem, but later plot developments punish the character or denigrate that previous solution in some way. The third tactic, the one most characteristic of AN UNMARRIED WOMEN, lets the fantasy resolution or fantasy fulfillment be completely enacted but then very clearly contains or limits that fulfillment. Finally, there are a few fantasy gratifications which the film just lets stand; these mostly relate to the "man's side of things" or to hegemonic patriarchal notions of how life in the domestic sphere ideally should proceed.

The first way that AN UNMARRIED WOMAN deals with conflicts and contradictions is to mention a serious conflict or to introduce a possible resolution but

then drop the subject entirely. Erica's (Jill Clayburgh's) job possibilities and future work plans stay in the realm of vague "I'd like to...s." She tells her lover Saul (Alan Bates) she wants to go back to school, that she wants more of a challenge than her part-time job in an art gallery offers her; but she also tells him she wants to travel to India, or to open a restaurant in which she would sing. She mentions her plans, but then just drops them. In contrast, we see Saul at work as an abstract expressionist painter. We know Saul's paintings are exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art and that he is wealthy, and we hear him tell Erica he cannot come down to New York on weekends to visit her from Vermont because "if he stops painting for just one day, he may never paint again." Because the film does not portray Erica's career efforts and strivings in detail, this devalues them. Erica's social aspirations in the film have significance only in terms of her struggle "to find her identity" and not as socially important endeavors.

The film's narrative structure also presents the teenage daughter Patty's problems and ideas in this way. Erica goes to her former husband Martin's office to discuss family business. She tells him that she is seeing a therapist and that Patty is having problems and should see a therapist, too. Without much demurring, Martin agrees (a fantasy resolution to settle money matters with a former husband so easily). But we never see Patty in therapy, talking about therapy, or even talking about her own development as a person. She exists within the circle of family problems only, and when she raises possible conflicts from the outside world, it is only so that the film can show how well Erica, and even more so, Saul, can "deal with these things."

By looking at one sequence in detail, we can understand how the narrative manipulates the figure of Patty to introduce and then polish off certain "contemporary issues," never to be mentioned in the film again. Erica and Patty are preparing a dinner for Saul where he will be able to meet Patty for the first time. The daughter talks to her mother about how she and her high school friends chipped in to get one of their group an abortion, a young woman too embarrassed to tell her lava about her pregnancy, much less her parents. When Saul arrives, he encourages Erica to give Patty a glass of wine cut with water, but the conservative mother will not. Whether in nervousness or in aggression, Patty blurts out, "I smoke grass once in a while." Saul responds, "So do I." Patty admits to nervousness, and then the dinnertime conversation gets down to an old predictable melodramatic staple. Patty expresses her fear that Mom will replace Dad with Saul. The issues of abortion and marijuana were polished off so the sequence could end on the basic stuff, Love, discussed in totally conventional terms.

The film introduces and deals with other conflicts that women viewers might identify with, but later narrative developments implicitly punish we embraced those resolutions. This is a chic way of dealing with homosexuality in current Hollywood

films. The topic may be introduced neutrally but is always followed up by denigration; for example, the roommate in *GIRLFRIENDS* or the protagonist's best friend in *10* are introduced neutrally but then shown to be "wrong." In *AN UNMARRIED WOMAN* Erica meets her therapist, a warm and understanding woman in her fifties, at a party where the therapist introduces her to an accompanying woman friend. Previous to that, much of the film's emotional weight and "good advice" had been presented and developed in the sequences between Erica and her therapist. *After* the party, we hear Erica tell her former husband Martin and later her friend Elaine that she is no longer in therapy and thus has a lot more money to spend on a new town house that she wants to rent or buy. If the therapist was lesbian, nevertheless she encouraged Erica to move back into heterosexual relations. We could read the configuration of sequences depicting the therapist as having a liberal message: "How understanding and objective she was." Yet the film implicitly punishes us and Erica for trusting that woman. There is another message we can get from such a narrative structure: "Trust her till you see she is a lesbian. If that's what she is, drop her."

One narrative tactic stylistically characterizes *AN UNMARRIED WOMAN*. It is, I think the reason why the film pleased so many women. Over and over again, fantasy fulfillments and fantasy resolutions to common dilemmas become enacted completely seemingly very satisfyingly. Each one of these gratifications comes at just the right time in the plot. In this way, the narrative structure effectively merges a kind of realist psychology (i.e., as if Mazursky had listened in on a women's consciousness-raising group selectively but attentively) with the tightness of the well-made play. The film's pacing makes it hard to refute Mazursky's seeming generosity in offering female viewers the gratifications he does. Many viewers do not notice in their initial enthusiasm for the film, however, the subtle ways in which the film contains and limits its fantasy fulfillments. Since this narrative tactic pervades the film throughout, let me list these gratifications in the order in which they occur:

Erica breaks up laughing when her husband Martin jogs into dog shit. They reconcile their resulting quarrel with a daytime tuck; their daughter knows and thinks it is fine. Erica meets her women friends once a week, often at a fancy restaurant; they talk intimately, complain, and give each other mutual support. One woman finds a 19-year old lover; one gets cured of depression by lithium. After Erica's husband leaves her, she gathers all his things for the trash. When a blind date make advances she throws that man out of the cab. She has an understanding and mature relation with Patty. She goes to her former husband Martin's office where she tells him off. She finds support in therapy. As a single woman, she gets a great fuck the first night she looks for one and then tells the guy not to expect to see her again. She meets and fucks with a famous artist, Saul, who immediately knocks out lover #1 at a party for making crude

remarks about her. Saul declares his love right away and becomes her steady lover. Her daughter and former husband are reconciled. She asserts her independence and refuses to go to Vermont to Saul's summer place with his children. She has independence, love, and plenty of money.

Yet the film cinematically limits and contains all these fantasy elements. Through casting, costuming, and camera work, Patty emerges as a subtly pejorative "type"--a "plain" girl with an angular face. Such a type was also exploited by Brian de Palma in *CARRIE*; that is, Patty is presumably not one of the "popular" kids on the high school scene. Erica is also filmed as "unlovely," especially when we first see her jogging, her stringy hair askew under a blue knit cap pulled far down. In terms of visual style, the composition and filming of the women's group make them "unlovely" when seen together. Erica's women friends are all heavier than she, and in their physical type they bear the connotations of "harsh" or "bitter" or "too old for the dating game." In a restaurant where they meet, the waitresses wear white shirts and black ties, connoting "masculine" or "dyke," here treated pejoratively. The women's meetings are filmed with an extreme wide-angle lens. This means that certain of the women in profile or three-quarter view loom large in the foreground with their features slightly distorted while the others seem very far away. Such a visual style lends a quality of alienation and out-of-touchness to the friends' otherwise intimate talk. The women meet at a bar after Erica's separation from Martin. This sequence has the same visual effect as their first meeting, only here they are filmed in an even darker and drabber environment. Later they meet sitting on Erica's bed in her apartment; there they discuss movie screen goddesses of yesteryear and today; Patty joins them and declares that today's film star is bisexual but makes it clear that she is not. The women constantly talk about sexual dilemmas and solutions, but the visual imagery says that, except for Erica, these women are sexual losers. Visually the film depicts the women's support network within an atmosphere which both suggests denigratingly, and then refuses, lesbianism.

Mostly *AN UNMARRIED WOMAN* offers fantasy fulfillments related to heterosexuality, but it also limits these. When Erica dances around her apartment to "Swan Lake" following her ten-minute morning fuck, supposedly that dance connotes "fulfillment" and "bliss." But Erica is also shown as gangly and awkward, and we are made more aware of the middle-class luxury of her surroundings than of the texture of her emotions. In a parallel sequence, one night she expunges her apartment of an of Martin's things, heaping them on the dining room table, ready to be thrown out. Just as we are allowed to derive gratification from Erica's rage, the camera shows us Patty sadly looking on and witnessing her mother's hatred for her father. Once again the protagonist's womanly emotion is visually commented on and contained.

With Martin gone, Erica could magically find a fuck as soon as she needed it. In his apartment, an acquaintance met in a bar, Charlie, tells her with male pride, "I'm a short-term guy. The only thing you can count on me for is sex." At first, Erica feels awkward since she has only been with Martin these last seventeen years. Her entry into intercourse is smoothed by her getting her sweater caught on her necklace and a splinter in her foot, Charlie could help her sympathetically with these problems, which "broke the ice." The next morning she gives Charlie his own words back: she won't see him again because she, too, is "a short-term guy." Her sexual experimentation may satisfy women viewers, but the film then contains it in two significant ways. First we are show that libertines like Charlie are BAD. He sees Erica at a party with Saul, which makes him jealous, so he blabs noisily about their having had sex. More important, after Erica and Saul leave the party, a sequence begins which initiates this couple's True Love. It contains the following conversation:

Erica: "His work is good actually. I was surprised."

Saul: "You can be a bastard and still have talent. Where did you see his work?"

Erica: "His place. Disappointed in me?"

Saul: "I don't know you well enough to be disappointed. But if you ever do it again, I'll kill you."

In a narrative development that would satisfy 18th century dramatic requirements for unity, it an happens on the same day. Saul and Erica sleep together in the afternoon; Saul knocks out Charlie that night; Saul tells Erica he will kill her if she does it again; Saul and Erica declare their love; they go to Saul's place after his suggestion that they "enjoy each other thoroughly." Sexual bliss comes properly only after True Love, which comes properly after the man's assertion of dominance, territoriality, and possession (*these* prove he loves her).

The film contains its last fantasy fulfillment, Erica's declaration of independence--her not going to Vermont to stay there with (entertain, take care of) Saul's children--for precisely the same reason, to assert Saul's possession and territoriality. But this time the containment is achieved entirely nonverbally. Saul, this famous painter whose works hang in the Museum of Modern Art, has Erica help him lower a huge canvas by ropes to the ground outside his apartment window. As she holds the painting upright, he gets in his car to drive off, saying that the picture is a gift to her. The last minutes of the film show Erica wending through New York streets, blown to and fro by the wind as she bears this oversize canvas back to her apartment, where it will dominate everything else. Saul has left his mark on her turf just like a male cat leaving its spray. Visually, what we see in these final shots is that the man has, even in his absence, taken over and indeed crippled the woman as an actor in public space.

Finally, *AN UNMARRIED WOMAN* does offer certain kinds of fantasy fulfillments which it just lets stand and does not limit or contain. These comment on and uphold the patriarchal order. Martin became dull emotionally through acting as an aggressive businessman (one of the most common themes found in the bourgeois novel). When Erica does not take him back, the film shows that as RIGHT. Since the authenticity of the family must be upheld, daddies have to play straight with it. Furthermore, Erica has found love with just one man. Such a narrative resolution, in fact, indicates the main, socially acceptable solution for divorced women's sexual and emotional problems and the main way they are allowed to become reglued into the social fabric by being part of a heterosexual couple.⁷ The film upholds those fundamental myths basic to capitalism. The narrative structure, Saul's characterization, and both the amount of screen time and visual detail devoted to his painting make men's work seem more important than women's; the female protagonist mainly has to find love and something called an "identity."⁸ Painting for Saul is not just an avocation but his business. Furthermore, as the romantic artist, he is in touch with his emotions, earthy, and passionate. The film shows him as making no mistakes.

AN UNMARRIED WOMAN'S greatest and most pervasive fantasy fulfillment, one never challenged, is that of total prosperity. The women are constantly eating out, Martin throws a shoe in the ocean which Erica said cost only \$35; Erica and Patty get "expensive" therapy; just shortly after her divorce Erica can buy or rent a townhouse. In reality, women's class position depends on that of their father or husband, and middle class women who are divorced usually go down rapidly in class status. Not here. The film upholds the myth of prosperity and presents a vision of the divorced woman's economically trouble-free life. Surely that fantasy, so desirable and pleasant to identify with, must have combined with the fantasies about love and independence to form the basis for so many women's enthusiastic responses to this film.

CRAIG'S WIFE: How a Woman Director Explores the Hegemonic Fantasy's Dark Side

Dorothy Arzner's feature films, particularly *CRAIG'S WIFE*, *CHRISTOPHER STRONG*, *DANCE GIRL DANCE*, and *WORKING GIRLS*, provide useful contrasting examples to the previous type of "optimistic" film. Arzner often looks at the negative hegemonic fantasy about What Women Want; she chooses to go deep into such a fantasy and through it. What are the negative hegemonic female fantasies--both held socially about us and also partially internalized by us? Woman is goldbrick, grasping, calculating. Woman is adulteress, emotionally brittle loner, homebreaker, or manipulator. In reality, we know what a woman must do for economic security. Women gossip about what a woman must do to Land Her Man (and keep him and get what she wants from him, etc.). What would we women like from men? That is, what are our common fantasies about what men could bestow? In contrast, what do we

realistically expect from them? Generations of women have shared and passed on a body of subcultural lore about these issues.

Within that lore, women's fantasy scenarios serve the function of reality-testing and are often tried out in practice as adaptive strategies imaginatively forged by an oppressed group. However, within mainstream culture, the existence of that "lore" and its wisdom is usually acknowledged only pejoratively. A grasping woman is depicted as killing love and men's initiative through her craving for security. Or else, in a staple of patriarchal melodrama, the woman sacrifices herself and foregoes her needs totally for those of the Children and the Man. In contrast, Arzner's films show the women characters carefully weighing a number of elements: money, social position, personal achievement, emotional integrity, companionship, security, and love. In Arzner's world money and social position very clearly shape the choices the women characters can and do make. And for a woman to choose economic and social independence over love, in Arzner's eyes, is an understandable, if not always joyous choice.

Examining one Arzner film, *CRAIG'S WIFE*, in greater detail will demonstrate more clearly this woman director's narrative strategy for presenting an unpleasant fantasy about women and going into that fantasy in depth. The commonly-held fantasy Arzner deals with in *CRAIG'S WIFE* is this: marriage is a bargain struck between a man and a woman and reflects the woman's maneuvering for power. A wife does not expect passion or even sexual satisfaction. What she gets is social position and a house. The house is her turf, her domain, a material world in which the organization and the day to day operation is under her control. Often this fantasy enters a film as a given, an element shaping the male protagonist's life--as in *REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE*, where James Dean strips the plastic covers off the living room furniture and denounces his father, seen wearing an apron for accepting a submissive role. In *CRAIG'S WIFE* such a fantasy about a wife who lives only for her house takes up the film's entire narrative development.

This is a hegemonic female fantasy for middle class women; certainly that marriage was a bargain in which a woman earned social position and a house was a hegemonic fantasy my mother implicitly passed on to me. The unpleasant side of this fantasy, of course, is that the woman may care more for her social standing and her furnishings than for the people with whom she lives. Because she was promised, as her marriage right, control of the domestic sphere, she may also try to extend that control over the household members' lives. This notion indeed represents a *hegemonic* fantasy, for both its promises and its denigrating aspects form part of our general cultural lore telling us what to expect from middle class American family life.

CRAIG'S WIFE depicts Harriet Craig as living only for control over her home and shows her as receiving her come-uppance. Arzner's film enacts the bad fantasy

completely. Called to her dying sister's bedside, Harriet Craig returns home after several days, insisting that her unwilling niece Ethel come back with her so the young woman's mother could "get more rest." While Harriet was gone, her husband Walter visited an old friend, Fergus Passmore, the following day Fergus' name appears in the newspaper as having committed suicide after he killed his unfaithful wife. Harriet manipulates Walter to protect their reputation; in so doing, she makes her attitudes toward him and their marriage clear, and in this way she rids him of his romantic illusions about her. This provides the dramatic mechanism for him to leave her, saying as he goes: "You married a house. I'll see to it that you have it always."

In the original misogynist play by George Kelly, written in 1925, Harriet offers Ethel a complete exposition of how to insure one's well-being within marriages.² This lengthy exchange comes early in the play just after Ethel says she is engaged to a college professor of "romance languages." Harriet's lines in the play reveal a key way that the hegemonic female fantasy is often manipulated within mainstream ideology, particularly how conservative voices can utilize women's fantasies to serve reaction against women's social gains. It works like this: Exactly the opposite motives are assigned to women characters than real women would have within the social sphere (a recent example is the secretary-protagonists' use of sado-masochistic gear to truss up the boss in *NINE TO FIVE*, as if what women wanted was to torment bosses sexually rather than just to get equitable working conditions). In the play *CRAIG'S WIFE*, Kelly's pejorative use of the word *independence*, repeated various times, indicates that his dialogue stands as an ideological reaction to women's gaining the right to vote in the U.S. in 1920. Harriet's argument to Ethel in the play goes like this: for women, romance is foolish and impractical. Once snared in romantic love, women are "obliged to revert right back to the almost primitive feminine dependence and subjection they've been trying to emancipate themselves from for centuries" (note how Kelly directly borrows from feminist rhetoric). Harriet tells her niece that she gained financial independence "as the result of another kind of independence; and that is the independence of authority--*over* the man I married" (emphasis Kelly's). Kelly's ideological counterattack against women's emancipation uses the tactic here of making Harriet seem unnatural, for she seeks to overturn the Great Chain of Natural Hierarchies. Kelly makes it seem "unnatural" that Harriet should self-consciously and from the start oppose a husband's authority. (Similarly Mazursky had to reintegrate the independent woman into the heterosexual couple as soon as possible, i.e., as soon as she was capable of sexual arousal after her divorce.)

In the play Harriet tells Ethel that the key to having security, economic and social "protection," and a home was to "secure their permanence" by manipulating a man's idealism and romantic attitude toward marriage. As in the Reagan era, the conservative position may start out paying lip service to the rhetoric of progressive

gains ("equal rights," "social welfare," etc.) but soon reveals in its diction its law-and-order, militaristic stance ("protection," "authority," "securing their permanence"). Phyllis Schlafly is a master of such tactics--for example, she recently declared to the press that sexual harassment does not really a threat to working women because women who are chaste in their appearance, who do not provoke trouble, do not get harassed. For the woman who received such formulae from her culture, she is expected to protest defensively: "But I'm a good girl (wife, mother, lover, woman). I always try to (act sincerely and honestly, be good, avoid overt displays of sexuality, keep my eyes cast down, visibly disappear so I won't get noticed and get in trouble)." The power of Kelly's, and Schlafly's, attack on women's independence is that they understand and can adapt previously accepted, i.e., hegemonic, fantasies both men and women hold about women's roles. Hegemonic fantasies about what women are or should be are often manipulated in mainstream cultural pronouncements so that the woman--even if she clings to only socially acceptable desires--is often held to blame for her own socially inferior position and for both her own oppression and that of others. Kelly's play CRAIG'S WIFE offers an excellent demonstration of how blame-the-victim ideology works.

Arzner's film does not do this. The film cuts down Harriet's discussion with Ethel to the lines cited below. Here Harriet still is manipulative but, as a woman, she speaks both realistically and consciously of her social role as "homemaker." The dilemma of love in marriage (Does marriage kill love?) is laid out with an its sides sympathetically presented, just as such contradictions exist within the hegemonic fantasy held about middle-class marriage.

Harriet: Did it ever occur to you that love is a liability in marriage? I saw to it that my marriage was emancipation for me. I had no private fortune or special training, Ethel. The only road to independence for me was through the man I married. I married to be independent.

Ethel: Independent of your husband, too?

Harriet: Independent of everyone.

Ethel: Walter adores you. He's the most trustworthy man in the world.

Harriet: I don't have to trust him. I know where he is and what he does. If I don't like it, he doesn't do it anymore.

Ethel: It doesn't strike me as honest.

Harriet: Dear Ethel, if the woman is the right kind of woman, it's better that the destiny of the home be in her hands than her husband's.

As the film CRAIG'S WIFE completely develops the bad fantasy of the manipulative wife, not only does it explain the causes for Harriet's behavior, but the film's ending, in fact, leaves Harriet well off. She has the house, now all to herself. She has received

a telegram announcing her sister's death, and this news opens her up to emotional life through the direct and cathartic experience of grief. And she has for a neighbor a warm, sympathetic widow who lives alone and who has just stopped by to leave off flowers and thus hears about the sister's death. Harriet had previously rejected this neighbor's visits as intrusive, yet now with the breakdown of her previous, rigid domestic routine, the film's final *mise-en-scene* leaves it open for us to assume that the neighbor, an emotionally wining source of support, will return. For me, it seemed that in the conclusion of the film Arzner refers to another (usually very well-hidden) aspect of middle class women's fears and dreams: the men will die off early with heart attacks or go off with younger women, etc., but then the older women will have the fine consolation of each other, their gardens, their mutual companionship, and their homes.

That this development is *desirable* for a middle-aged woman, or at least a pleasant hegemonic fantasy, is reinforced by what happens to the other middle-aged women characters in the film, all of whom are developed more fully than in the play. Harriet had harassed both her housekeeper, Mrs. Harold, and her husband's aunt, his mother's sister who lives with the Craigs--Miss Austin. In a gratifying fantasy resolution to both women's problems, Miss Austin finally explains to her nephew Walter how Harriet has manipulated him all these years, and then she invites Mrs. Harold to accompany her around the world as her traveling companion. The maid and the maiden aunt have never had Harriet's opportunity to get a house, to establish "homes" as middle class wives. Their future, as the film envisions it, is a pleasant fantasy about class solidarity among older women who can and will opt for independence, companionship, and expanded horizons. Walter had two mothers living with him--his aunt and his wife. At the end of the film he finally asserts his "manly" independence--principally by messing up Harriet's immaculate parlor and then moving out. At the same time, both Harriet and his aunt are now free of him, and the film gives no indication that emotionally either will miss him. In her frustration, Miss Austin first confronted Harriet and then old Walter that the only reason she had stayed with the Craigs all these years was because of a deathbed promise to her *sister* to take care of him--bonding between women having kept her there. In the course of the film she explains to Walter several times how Harriet has removed him from his friends and has him completely under control and socially isolated. In contrast to Walter and Harriet's fate, Miss Austin finally declares, "I'll travel around the world so I won't become little. These are the rooms of the dying and the laid out."

Only when Walter could understand the manipulative aspects of romance could he become an independent adult. The hegemonic fantasy gratifications promised by marriage, with all their illusory and limiting aspects, exist in men's minds, too. After all, as Harriet says in her *realpolitik*, marriage is a bargain. A man fools himself who

does not want to see what it really means to have a Wife: a servant, an ego-tender, a domestic organizer, an arranger of leisure and sexual desire. If a woman manipulates a man for economic security, the myth of romance and the need for a Wife often keep a man emotionally a child.

The hegemonic fantasy about the wife who invests all her emotional energy into maintaining her social position and home, which were her marriage-right, has many negative connotations. As in ORDINARY PEOPLE or "Rip Van Winkle" or medieval pageant plays, she becomes equated with the castrating bitch, the phallic woman, the devil's wife. Because of the woman's drive for control over it, the domestic sphere itself seems civilizing, inhibiting, and castrating (What does it inhibit? Male adventure, duty, comradeship, etc.). In such a guise, the castrating wife--or the domestic sphere--even appears in contemporary film theory, as in the following discussion by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith about melodrama as a genre:

"It (melodrama) often features women as protagonists, and where the central figure is a man there is regularly an impairment of his "masculinity".... In so far as activity remains equated with masculinity and passivity with femininity, the destiny of the characters whether male or female, is unrealizable; he or she can only live out the impairment ("castration") imposed by the law." [10](#)

Such an interpretation of melodrama strongly contrasts with Arzner's own interpretation of the sexual political situation at the end of CRAIG'S WIFE, where, through her negative example, the phallic woman has given her weakling husband for the first time in his life some "balls." According to Arzner, she designed the "whole production" of CRAIG'S WIFE, which differed as follows from George Kelly's work:

"I did try to be as faithful to his (Kelly's) play as possible, except that I made it from a different point of view. I imagined Mr. Craig was dominated somewhat by his mother and therefore fell in love with a woman stronger than he. I thought Mr. Craig should be down on his knees with gratitude because Mrs. Craig made a man of him."

"When I told Kelly this, he rose to his six-foot height and said, 'That *is not my* play. Walter Craig was a sweet guy and Mrs. Craig was an SOB.' He left. That was the only contact I had with Kelly." [11](#)

CRAIG'S WIFE also utilizes the three other ways of dealing with fantasy gratifications and punishments which I found in AN UNMARRIED WOMAN, but they do not stylistically define the film. However, such elements do reinforce Arzner's stylistic and thematic strategy of exploring women's condition in depth. If a conflict and its resolution are mentioned, they are not dropped (as with Patty's discussion of

abortion and marijuana in AN UNMARRIED WOMAN), but are taken up again and the causes of the conflict sympathetically explored. For example, CRAIG'S WIFE early shows us Mrs. Passmore deceiving her husband, but later, in discussing Fergus Passmore's murdering her, Walter Craig defends her: "She fell in love with Fergus and then fell in love with someone else." Ordinarily in narrative film, such a social scandal may be introduced so as to provide the occasion for the major characters to confront each other, but rarely are the villain's (villainess') motives in that secondary incident explored.

Second, denigrating connotations in reference to the female characters are allowed in CRAIG'S WIFE, but these connotations are not just presented as givers; rather they are pushed and explored. The flowery neighbor, effusive and gushy, is shown to feel lonely without a "house full of children" and responds sympathetically to Harriet's grief. The connotation "effusive" gives way to "motherly" to "warmly concerned." Similarly, at the film's opening, as Miss Austin dines with her nephew, she seems to be the meddling older woman, at least in part. In that, in seeming to need to control her surrogate son's life and to accept his economic largess, she stands as Harriet's double, but an older, more beneficent motherly version. As the film progresses, this connotation of her character gives way to a far richer vision of both her role in Walter's life and the options she herself has.

Finally, there are a few fantasy gratifications that the film just lets stand. In particular, Ethel is rescued by her fiancé, who takes off work from the college where he teaches, travel to Ethel's side just because Ethel's aunt would not let him talk to the young woman on the phone. Two aspects of such a fantasy fulfillment are worth mentioning. First, it is pure fantasy because the fiancé seemingly faces no economic constraints from his job, his position in the public sphere, which would keep him from taking off work to pursue love. Second, rescue by a male is one of the major hegemonic female fantasies, and Arzner lets it stand--for the ingenue. Arzner does the same thing at the end of DANCE GIRL DANCE, only with a father-figure rescue instead. As in AN UNMARRIED WOMAN, when a fantasy fulfillment is presented as total, it reaffirms that which mainstream culture would encourage young women to wish. Arzner does not directly challenge the fantasy of the male rescuer, but she uses other tactics to underscore that it is, in fact, an unlikely resolution if economic and social considerations are also weighed.

Dealing with Ideology in the Domestic Sphere and about the Domestic Sphere

In AN UNMARRIED WOMAN the characters give speeches which pass on in one way or another received ideas and established knowledge, both "what everyone knows" and what is commonly attributed to certain types of persons and situations. In this way the characters' speeches both are appropriate for the type of person speaking

and build that characterization. Erica and her women friends' speeches distill, usually in an ideological way, current notions about love, women, and sexuality. The speeches also create a portrait of a "modern" woman, Erica, whose ideas and dilemmas then have resonance with many of the spectators' ideas and dilemmas. Similarly, in *CRAIG'S WIFE*, much of the dialogue is directly about "the rules of the game." In both films other elements affect how we react to the direct discussion of social coding within the dialogue. Such elements include how the narrative episodes are structured and paced, how much and what kind of "attention" is paid, visually and audibly, to certain aspects of the characterization, and when and why such cinematic "attention" is withheld.

Viewers are not dumb for watching soap operas, for getting caught up in melodrama's conflicts, for the narrative arts that deal with the domestic sphere treat things which people need to think about. There are, structurally, many tensions generated in the nuclear family because of its relation to capitalist production and commodification, and we use fiction, especially melodramatic fiction, to explore these tensions.¹² The very concept of "family" is heavily ideological and contains so many contradictions that it may be impossible to satisfactorily mediate the desires aroused by the concept (and by our primary emotional experiences in families! and the reality of what "family" means in women's daily lives. The woman character is placed structurally within these narratives so as to represent the contradictions between dependence and autonomy, between love and money, that all women are thrust into under capitalism. We are forced both symbolically and in our relations to bridge the gap between society's emotional norms (romance, motherhood, fidelity, loyalty, sacrifice, caring, etc.) and its realities which contradict those norms.

Women's space, both economically and socially, remains identified with the domestic sphere. This is true cross-culturally.¹³ In contrast stands the realm of public life and official political, institutional, and symbolic power. In our own culture, as Rayna Rapp writes:

"... the concept of the family is a socially necessary illusion which simultaneously expresses and masks recruitment to relations of production, reproduction, and consumption--relations that condition different kinds of household bases in different class sectors. Our notions of the family absorb the conflicts, contradictions, and tensions that are actually generated by those material, class-structured relations that households hold to resources in advanced capitalism. In sum, "family" as we understand (and misunderstand) the term is conditioned by the exigencies of household formation, and serves as a shock-absorber to keep households functioning."¹⁴

As I have pointed out, the narrative arts, especially melodrama, deal with the historical reality that women are enmeshed in four general ways. Each way can and usually does recoup the discussion of the conflict in terms acceptable to the bourgeois patriarchy. If the conflict is mentioned, perhaps indicating a solution, but then the topic dropped from consideration, it becomes a matter of out-of-sight, out-of-mind. A resolution may be both indicated and denigrated; this is the most common way to deal with a "sticky" problem, letting the viewer know, "Of course you do not want that." Or fulfillment may be openly granted, especially to women characters, and then contained. (In this way, COMING HOME was the first Hollywood film I saw which indicated that women might prefer some form of sex other than fucking, but then oral sex could be depicted as the preferred form of sex only if offered by a paraplegic man.) Finally, fulfillments will be allowed that reaffirm the patriarchal order.

A narrative text allows for much projection on the reader/viewer's part, allows for a multiplicity of readings. However, across texts such as novels, ads, situation comedies, soap operas, melodramas--all the narrative arts which commonly deal with the domestic sphere--an image of what it is that women are supposed to be or want emerges. I call this the hegemonic female fantasy. It is both in our heads and imposed on us. In terms of the cultural products we receive, it is a bourgeois patriarchal creation. Inside our heads, it is something we use, something we react to or against, and something that limits us. The feminist movement, especially in its cultural wing, has created counter fantasies, other options, other ways of regarding both our past and our current situation. And it is dialectically in the interaction between feminists' developing new concepts as part of a movement for social change and the actual fact of revolutionary change that a whole new hegemonic female fantasy might emerge.

NOTES:

1. For a useful introduction to the work and ideas of Antonio Gramsci, see Carl Boggs, *Gramsci's Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 1976). In the United States, the most eloquent demonstrations of patriarchal hegemony have come from those who participate in it the least, the radical feminists. See Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Bantam, 1976); Ti-Grace Atkinson, "The Institution of Sexual Intercourse," *Amazon Odyssey* (New York: Links Books, 1971); Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1974); and Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1974) for a demonstration of how radical feminist intellectuals who had an on-going, radical practice within the women's movement were so quickly and thoroughly able to demolish hegemonic patriarchal intellectual concepts that had dominated us for years. [Return](#).

2. For discussions of the mechanisms of this, see two very different feminist approaches: Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs*, 5, No. 4 (Summer 1980) and Nancy Chodorow, "Oedipal Asymmetries and Heterosexual Knots," *Social Problems*, 23, No. 4 (April 1976). [Return](#).
3. For the classic text on the colonized mind and a description of its cure, read Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1968; original 1961). [Return](#).
4. For a discussion of the relation between individual development and the historical forces impinging on human sexuality, see Ethel Spector Person, "Sexuality as the Mainstay of Identity: Psychoanalytic Perspectives," *Signs*, 5, No. 4 (Summer 1980); and *Radical History Review*, Special Issue on Sexuality in History, No. 20 (Spring-Summer 1979). [Return](#).
5. Consult the following excellent feminist analyses of soap operas: Carol Lopate, "Daytime Television: You'll Never Want to Leave Home," *Radical America*, 11, No. 1 (January-February 1977), Lillian Robinson, "What's My Line? Telefiction and Women's Work," *Sex, Class, and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978); Tania Modleski, "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas," *Film Quarterly*, 33, No. 1 (Fall 1979); Sheila Wawane, "TV's MEDICAL CENTER Sells Sexual Self-Determination," *Jump Cut*, No. 16 (November 1977). [Return](#).
6. For a discussion about social codes and conventions and how these enter a filmic narrative, see my article, "S/Z and RULES OF THE GAME," *Jump Cut*, Nos. 12-13 (Winter 1976-77), pp. 45-51. [Return](#).
7. Anthropologist Mary Douglas discusses how many societies conflate being on the boundary economically and socially with being sexually dangerous. *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966). [Return](#).
8. In contrast, a melodrama can end with a male protagonist alone raising children. He is then seen as heroic because he opted for less social power in order to become a full-time Dad. This is seen in *THE DAYS OF WINE AND ROSES* and *KRAMER vs. KRAMER*. [Return](#).
9. George Kelly, *Craig's Wife* (New York: Samuel French, 1925), pp. 16-19. [Return](#).
10. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Minnelli and Melodrama," *Screen*, 18, No. 2 (Summer 1977), 115-116. [Return](#).

11. Dorothy Arzner in an interview with Gerald Peary and Karyn Kay, in *The Work of Dorothy Arzner: Towards a Feminist Cinema*, ed. Claire Johnston (London: British Film Institute, 1975). I am grateful to Chuck Kleinhans for pointing out this quotation to me and for sharing with me his research on Arzner's films, especially CRAIG'S WIFE. [Return](#).

12. Chuck Kleinhans, "Notes on the Melodrama and the Family under Capitalism," *Film Reader*, 3 (February 1978), 40-47. [Return](#).

13. Michelle Z. Rosaldo, "Woman, Culture and Society: A Theoretical Overview," *Woman, Culture, and Society* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 1742. [Return](#).

14. Rayna Rapp, "Family and Class in Contemporary America: Notes Toward an Understanding of Ideology," *Papers in Women's Studies* (University of Michigan), May 1978, p. 103. [Return](#).